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ABSTRACT

The lack of an operational linkage between the educational forces of school, home, and community is a major part of the crisis in the schools today. To reach the widest number of children in the earlier school years, it is vital for schools to connect with the home. An ideal time to begin a coordinated, concerted national effort linking the resources of the home and school is now. Even though the family has changed, parents continue to want to help their children. To help parents do so, schools must find ways to provide information and materials, increase parents' awareness of their importance as "educators," and offer a variety of programs for families to use with children at home. The following recommendations can serve as criteria for developing school programs: (1) link the involvement of parents directly to the achievement of their children; (2) provide opportunities for families to supplement and reinforce children's academic skills at home; (3) initiate local, state, and/or national efforts to expand educational partnership; and (4) provide involvement opportunities at all levels of schooling for as many persons as possible. To assure acceptance and continuation of linking programs, parent/community involvement must be viewed as a legitimate activity of schools and as an integral part of its delivery of services. (BJD)

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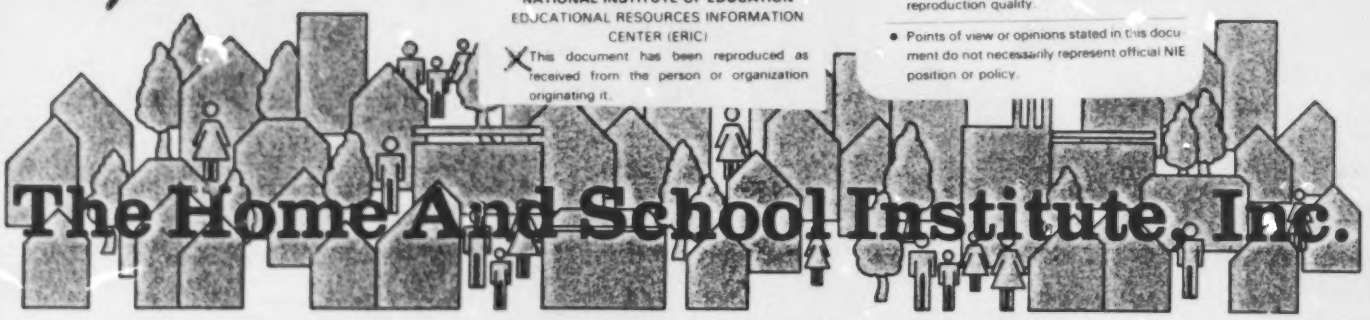

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FOCUS FOR EDUCATIONAL REFORM: BUILDING A HOME-SCHOOL INFRASTRUCTURE

by Dorothy Rich*

The National Commission on Excellence in Education Report addressed parents in a postscript—an addendum to the main message about the state of our nation's education.

To parents it said: "As surely as you are your children's most important teachers, your children's ideas about education and its significance begin with you...Moreover, you bear a responsibility to participate actively in your children's education."

Good words. But what's included in that responsibility? And what is expected of the schools in working with parents?

In my view, what's needed is a basic infrastructure between school and home. This is called for by both research and common sense, and it has not been adequately built before. For years, parent-teacher nights were thought to be enough.

Infrastructures undergird and make possible every complex coming together of people...roads, sewers, bridges, etc. New York City's water lines are leaking, but at least they were built. Schools never have properly connected themselves to the rest of society—to the home, the mental health agencies, the courts, the mass media, the outside-of-school environments in which children spend more hours than they do in school.

This lack of infrastructure is a major part of the school's problem today, and it is not included in the recent reports bemoaning the state of American education. The solutions proposed in the recent reports to stem the "rising tide of mediocrity" are school-based. They do not address actions that need to be taken by schools to work with the home and by parents to work with their children at home.

Parent involvement is as important to the success of schooling as is the water supply to a city.

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EDUCATION IS MORE THAN SCHOOLING

What is needed is operational linkage between the educational forces of the school, the home and community in which children live. Just as good health depends on more than medical care, education depends on more than schooling. The days when education was a process outside and separate from the family are over. The age of experts is increasingly giving way to self-help. Not so long ago, it was thought that schools had all the answers. They were the sources of information. People went to school to start learning. No longer.

Technology and the information revolution have made many people outside of school as smart or smarter than teachers. Information is coming at everyone at the same time. This isn't bad—it's good. But, it demands that teachers today play new roles, working in partnership with resources outside the school. There has been little if any discussion of this major change in teaching.

Schools depend upon the input from the home—the children and their attitudes. But overall, schools have not worked with the home or with other community agencies in a concerted, systematic manner. The current connection to industry to form partnerships with schools is an optimistic sign in the right direction. But to reach the widest number of children in the earlier school years, it is vital for schools to connect with the home.

This administration is in a unique and strong position to take today's crisis concern for education and turn it into an opportunity. This is a time of consensus when everyone, across political lines, agrees that something must be done. The Reagan administration has already, to its credit, fostered within the Department of Education a re-emphasis on the basic function of families as educators of children. Secretary of Education, Terrell Bell, has been for decades an advocate of the role of parents as teachers. The National Education Association has indicated readiness to emphasize the improvement of instruction and the school to home connection. This is an ideal time to begin a coordinated, concerted national effort linking the resources of the home and school to provide a strong infrastructure for education.

HARVARD DEPENDS ON FAMILIES

Harvard University president Derek Bok in his commencement address this year underscored this point: "Schools can accomplish only so much by themselves; they will not go far in demanding more work from their students without the support of parents and local communities. Corporations should help to upgrade vocational programs; universities should offer specialized advice to principals and teachers. But parents are by far the most important allies. One need look no further than this University. At present, 12 percent of all applicants to Harvard College are Asian-Americans—more than five times their share of the total national population. These applicants went to the same schools in the same towns as other young Americans. They achieved, on the average, much more. In large part, their success is due to the higher expectations of their parents and the greater support they received at home. We must somehow find ways to mobilize similar encouragement for other children, since such support will probably do more to bring about improvements in

student achievement than any reforms that schools can carry out by themselves."

After years of over-dependence on the school to do everything, the public appears to be ready to assume responsibility for what's happening to children. In this year's Gallup Poll, as in previous years, lack of discipline was cited as the school's biggest problem. When asked for the cause of the school's discipline problems, those public laid chief blame on the home and on what parents are or are not doing.

THE ROLE OF THE FAMILY

Is what happens in the family the school's business? Not too many years ago, the answer would probably have been No. But, the importance of the family as an educational institution is now known. This is being further confirmed in current research on the interruption in childrens' school learning that is caused by parents' divorce. There is a high divorce rate and the majority of mothers today work outside the home. But parents keep remarrying, and they do care about their children. Research studies testify to the fact that the family is "here to stay."

But it is a new kind of family for the schools to work with. Today's parents may not be able to come to 2 P.M. school events, but they continue to want to help their children.

In a survey of research prepared for the Home and School Institute's Single Parent Families and the Schools Conference this year, it was found that working mothers spend almost as much time caring for their children as non-working mothers. These mothers work harder to maintain their home while holding a job. Working parents are not typically in the school during the day, but they are there when school activities include the child. In short, working in itself does not significantly limit a parent's participation. Being a single parent does not lessen the time that parents talk to teachers. Nor does it keep these parents from spending time with their children on school work.

Today's family may look different, but parents, even under the constraints of limited time and financial pressures, care about and value their children's schooling.

THE ROLE OF THE SCHOOL

Schools are on the front lines in a society that is changing all around them. In the past two decades, over half of the mothers who used to welcome children home after school are no longer there. In many schools the majority of the children are living, at least for a while, in homes with one parent. The standard of living in these homes goes down markedly when fathers move out. These are changes that have come upon the schools only recently, and really, schools are just beginning to respond.

The school is THE community institution that has contact with students over many years. This fact alone gives schools both the opportunity and the

responsibility to reach out to the student and the family beyound the classroom walls. Even as schools improve classroom performance and teacher competencies, there is no denying the impact of the family on children's learning. Not even the best school can do the job alone.

What is needed today are ways to provide information and materials to help all families: to become more aware of their important role as "educators" of their children and offer a variety of programs for family use with children at home.

These responsibilities should not be the schools alone. Governments, state and local, oversee all community agencies. Legislation can be used to encourage and support agencies working together. Business and community groups play a role, but the schools can lead and orchestrate the effort. The Home and School Institute has since 1964 worked on collaborative strategies for schools and families. This experience plus that of the compensatory education programs in the past two decades provide some basic formulas for building a basic school/community infrastructure.

Parent involvement is an "apple pie" concept which everyone is in favor of in principle, but there has little professional consensus either as to what parent involvement consists of or how to make it happen en masse. Despite some promising developments, the state of the art across the nation is still at a very rudimentary level.

There is a pervasive and wrong-headed belief that parent involvement is difficult to create, burdensome and doomed to failure. What is seen now in parent involvement is wide variation from one school system to another and even from school to school. This often results to too much "reinvention of the wheel." This is slow, expensive, and inefficient.

TOWARDS AN EFFECTIVE PROGRAM

The following guidelines can serve as criteria for developing school system programs:

1) Link parents' participation directly to the achievement of their children in order to have widespread and sustained involvement. An important, intrinsic reward for parents is the success experienced by their own children. The federal government's major school-community model, i.e. the Advisory Council, is not the logical choice for initiating mass parent involvement today. It does not fit the lifestyle or interests of a growing number of parents. In many school systems, Advisory Councils never got off the ground and were a burden for parents as well as teachers. While these Councils may build parental self-concept, they do not build children's achievement. Research evidence shows that programs using the model of parents as tutors or home-teachers does build achievement. The best advice is to use the model that shows evidence of success.

2) Provide opportunities for families to supplement and reinforce children's academic skills at home—in the short time that parents have at home. This avoids meetings that both parents and teachers would rather skip. It can include sending home learning activities related to school that parents and children do their own. Home activities are attractive and non-threatening when they connect with school but do not duplicate school work.

The Home and School Institute has been doing this in a number of projects with school systems in California, Michigan, South Carolina, and the District of Columbia. Where it has been tried, it has worked: children gain on tests, parents are happier with the schools and with their role. This experience indicates that all parents can be meaningfully involved in the education of their children. The involvement of parents at this basic level--what parents can do for their own children--can lead to other more socially altruistic forms of involvement later.

The Home and School Institute trains teachers to tell parents how important they are in teaching their child, and teachers are given home learning materials to use with parents. In some programs parents teach other parents...very effectively.

Easy techniques are used to foster learning. In fact parents who know the value of informal education may be using these on their own. These techniques involve for the young child such activities as using the clock to teach arithmetic, using the TV schedule to keep to time limits, dialing and reading telephone numbers. For the older youngster they include making "best buy" purchases at the grocery store, using maps to plan family trips.

These activities are done alongside normal household routines. The hurried parent in a few minutes a day teaches science, reading, math or writing in a relaxed, at home way. The material is presented in such a way that parents know exactly what to do. They are encouraged to use their own creativity and they're told that they can do nothing wrong. This individualizes education in a meaningful and personal way at home.

The system has the advantage of the child feeling systematic encouragement from the parent to learn and achieve. The approach has the added advantage of being non-threatening in that the activities are not traditional school work.

This method reaches parents and gets them to work with their child at home, building on their ambitions and their love for their children. It starts with the idea that even the least educated, poorest parents have these two feelings—ambition and love for their children—in abundance. That is why I call this the "nondeficit concept." I start with the assurance that parents' love is something strong that can be built upon.

3) Initiate local, state and/or national effort, to expand educational partnership in three major ways that support and reinforce one another.

a/ Home learning activities that connect the school to the world. These can be distributed at the parents' workplace, churches, gas stations (there is reading and math at the gas station), grocery stores, etc.

b/ Family Learning Centers in schools, community agencies, storefronts, or mobile vans.

These are demonstration rooms, visible how-to models showing how real home items and household funiture, are used for home learning purposes. This program uses audio-visual and problem solving techniques--not typical classroom methods--to provide information in such areas as health, safety and education.

A corps of trained, local community volunteers or paraprofessionals can staff these rooms, share materials, respond to parents' concerns, referring families, when necessary, to other community agencies.

c/ A Media Campaign to educate the public on the specialness of the home as a learning place and on its possibilities to help the child achieve. This helps parents gain the sense that child rearing is important. It relieves parental anxiety by showing easy effective ways to increase children's skills and self-esteem. Included in this campaign can be a telephone program in which parents and students call to get answers to problems.

4) Provide involvement opportunities at all levels of schooling and for as many persons outside the schools as possible.

Research and school-community programs up to now have primarily centered on the early childhood years. Continuing support is needed as children move through school years. Teens need parental help to get the best from the secondary years. Youngsters going through their parents' mid-life marriage and career changes need support from the school. But thus far, except for a few innovative programs, not much is in place for the needs of the adolescents.

An opportunity exists for schools to involve wider constituencies--wider than just parents and children. For example, senior citizens are voting on school budgets and they can be involved in the work of the schools. HSI has just tested a systematic program for involving seniors as volunteers in the classrooms and as liaisons to the home. These seniors work successfully with young adolescents who need extra help and confer with families who need extra help.

Parents and others who feel they are part of the educational process are more likely to be satisfied with the result. They may rise to defend the school at the ballot box. As fewer citizens have direct ties to the schools via their own children, gaining new constituencies becomes more and more important to the survival of the school system. The more people who appreciate the goals of education, as well as its problems and pressures, the better.

Not only will school budgets have a better chance for community support, but this will also ensure broader support for integrating specially targeted programs into the overall school program. Too often special programs, even Chapter I, are considered extra to the total school programs. This means that the good practices from these programs do not permeate the total system. When more people are being served with the results of school programs, there will be more general support.

Is this a dream? No, it's been done and it's worked. But the approach is still too fragementary, occurring here or there when school officials, for a time, have the funds and interest to make it happen. This is truly a self-help program in the field. But to get it into the field takes the backing of local, state or federal officials who understand the need for educational infrastructure.

THE NEXT STEPS

Programs can begin with one parent, one teacher, one administrator. But they tend not to continue unless there is support from groups of parents, teachers, and administrators.

To assure this acceptance, parent-community involvement must be viewed as a legitimate activity of the schools and as an integral part of its delivery of services, not an add-on. Reaching the family must be seen as important as reaching the child.

It will take a reprioritizing of what is considered essential. A major step will be taken when it's seen as essential to have in each school a staff member who spends work time connecting the school to the parents and to the community. The bottom line will be increased student achievement as well as better public relations.

Working on a partnership basis with the home may be more difficult today than it might have been a few years ago. Existing patterns of neighborhood schools have changed. Conferences are harder to set up. Other ways will have to be employed to reach, inform, and receive advice from parents in addition to the traditional face-to-face meeting.

Parents have needs that schools will have to meet. After years of being told that they don't know "the right way" to teach, parents may need to have their confidence restored. Schools have to convince parents to trust themselves and once again regard themselves as their child's primary and ongoing teachers.

Educators seeking substantive family involvement in education will have to be prepared to exert leadership—with staff and with parents. Working with families requires certain basic attitudes, skills, and behaviors different from working with children alone. School personnel may need retraining--almost retooling--to make this transition.

Educators must work with the community and with the people out there who surround and support children. This is the education infrastructure that makes successful schooling possible. It is the team teaching that is needed today.

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